

Drash 10/29/2011
Parsha Noah
Roberta Gross-Torres

Shabbat Shalom.

Noah is Spelled "Nun-chet". from the Hebrew root nun-vav-chet meaning "rest", He received his name from his father who said "This one will provide us relief/rest from our work and from the toil of our hands.." (Gen.5:29) Such a simple little word. Two letters. A Hebrew expression for an illiterate person or a bad speller is "P'loni kotav No-ah b'sheva s'ni'ot" -meaning " "he spells 'Noah' with seven letters".

But I am not going to talk about that today.

We are all familiar with the Noah narratives. Today I plan to remind you of some additional details to help focus on Noah through a different lens and, perhaps, raise some new questions.

Noah, the second parasha in our Torah, functions as a bridge between the primordial past of Bereshit and introduction of the Patriarchs in Lech L'echa. It includes two of the most well known and beloved stories in the entire Tanach - The Flood Narrative, often seen as a "third creation story" with roots in the same archtypical story as the Babylonian Enuma Elish - and story of The Tower of Babel.
But I am not going to talk about that today, either.

Contemporary documentary hypothesis argues that our text is the product of multiple versions of the story that were later edited by redactors. Scholars from Julius Wellhausen to Richard Elliott Friedman "cut and paste" the Flood story into two versions: the "J" version - based on stories circulating in the southern Kingdom of Judea and the "P" version coming from the culture of the Priestly class. Each can be read separately with little loss of continuity.

The God of the J source is an active participant in the story. When Noah enters the ark God closes the door behind him. It rains for a poetic 40 days and 40 nights. The first thing Noah does after exiting the ark is to build an altar and sacrifice clean birds to God, who savors the sweet aroma. This story ends with God reciting a short poem about nature, which had just been catastrophically interrupted, promising:

"All the rest of the days of the earth,
seed and harvest,
and cold and heat,
and summer and winter,
and day and night
shall not cease."

In other words, Chaos will be replaced with lasting order.

The God of the P source is transcendent, directing from afar. It rained for exactly 150 days. There is no mention of sacrifice but we do get quantitative instructions given in cubits. We are told Noah's age - 600 years - , the dates on which things happened and who begat whom. It could have been written by a CPA. It ends with a promise in the form of a distant rainbow.

But, I am not going to talk about that today.

What I want to do today is share Midrash about the character of Noah.

In the very end of Parashat Bereshit, we are told that God regretted the results of his earthly creation experiment. It tells us that divine beings, the Nephilim and Rephaim, appeared on earth and saw how beautiful were the daughters of men. They cohabited with these daughters, who bore them offspring, who were, the text says, the heroes of old, the men of renown.

The Midrash is full of stories of these Nephilim and Rephaim, not to mention of animals and birds that were having relations with those of other kinds. Men planted wheat and oats sprouted. The cow refused obedience to the ploughman and the furrow was refractory. This made God very sad.

Noah [Louis Ginzberg in *Legends of the Jews*, p. 95], had scarcely come into the world when a marked change was noticeable. When wheat was planted, wheat was what grew! After Noah was born the earth returned to pre-fall status. Noah invented the plough and the hoe. God figured Noah could take control of all that chaos. Noah, we are told, walked with God.

So, God decided to cleanse the earth with water (sort of like a mikveh?), wipe out all living beings except for Noah, his kin, and the animals, and make a fresh start. It took 120 years to build the ark: more than 100,000 s.f. on three decks of gopher wood, in order to give men time to ask Noah what he was doing and, perhaps, change their ways. Noah tried to sell atonement but the wicked and violent people and

animals did not want to buy. With only a few exceptions, they did not believe there would be a flood. Finally, some must have believed because Midrash tells us there were more animals who wanted to go on the ark than there was room for. God told Noah how to choose the ones who would be the least difficult to manage. My favorite Midrash is about King Og of Bashan. To put it into context: Deuteronomy 3:11 says "only Og, King of Bashan, remained of the remnant of the Rephaim: Behold! - is not his 15 ft by 6 ft. iron cradle still in the town of Rabbah?" This was one big giant with one big iron cradle for the early Iron-age. So, now that we know who King Og was, we can appreciate the Midrash saying "The giant Og, the king of Bashan, had promised that, if Noah would save him, he and his descendants would serve Noah as slaves in perpetuity. He sat on top of the ark securely, and in this way escaped the flood of waters. Noah doled out his food to him daily, through a hole he had made in the side of the ark for that purpose. [Louis Ginzberg's Legends of the Jews (page 104)]

It must have been crowded, noisy and smelly on that ark. We are told each pair of animals had its own room. Noah and his family had no family time or down time and they became exhausted. In one typically anachronistic Midrash we are told that Eliezer (Abraham's servant) asked Shem, Noah's oldest son: How did you manage to take care of the many kinds of animals? Shem replied: The truth is, we had much trouble in the ark. The creature whose habit it was to eat by day, we fed by day; the one who ate by night, we fed by night. As for the chameleon, my father did not know what it ate. One day, as my father was sitting and cutting a pomegranate, a worm fell out of it and the chameleon consumed it. After that, he would knead some prickly reeds infested with worms and feed it with them. As for the phoenix, my father found him sleeping in a corner of the ark and asked him: Why did you not request food? He replied: I saw you were busy, and I said to myself that I should not trouble you. Noah responded: Since you were concerned about my trouble, may it be the Lord's will that you never die. Hence it is said in Job 29:18, "I shall multiply my days as the phoenix."(Bialik p. 29, Par. 130).

These are just a few of the many *madrishim* from which we learn that Noah was seen as a clever, resourceful, kind, gentle, and caring man. When the dove was sent out of the ark for the first time but could not, according to Gen 8:9, "find a resting place for her foot...Noah put out his hand and took her into the ark with him."

After the flood, however, things did not go quite as well as hoped. In *Tanhuma Noah*, [chapter 13 (Bialik p. 29, para 134)] we read the well known fable about what happened after the flood when Noah decided to go into the wine business. "When Noah began planting," it says, "Satan came, stationed himself before him, and asked, "What are you planting?". Noah :(replied) A vineyard." Satan (said) "what is

its nature?" Noah (answered): "its fruit, whether fresh or dried, is sweet and from it one makes wine, which gladdens a man's heart." Satan (then asked) "Will you agree to let both of us plant it together?" Noah said "Very well." What did Satan do? He brought a ewe lamb and slaughtered it over a vine. After that, he brought a lion, which he likewise slaughtered. Then a monkey...and Finally a pig. With the blood that dripped from them, he watered the vineyard. The charade was Satan's way of saying that when a man drinks one cup of wine, he acts like a ewe lamb, humble and meek. When he drinks two, he immediately believes himself to be as strong as a lion and proceeds to brag mightily, saying "who is like me?" When he drinks three or four cups, he becomes like a monkey, hopping about giggling, and uttering obscenities in public, without realizing what he is doing. Finally, when he becomes blind drunk, he is like a pig, wallowing in mire and coming to rest among refuse. All of the above befell Noah. And we get a Midrash with a morality lesson based on the story known as "the sin of Ham and the Cursing of Canaan" that tells of Noah's son Ham, who revealed to his brothers that he had either seen or engaged in a vague but clearly culturally perverse sexual activity with his father Noah, while Noah was drunk. Thus, Ham's descendents, the Canaanites, were cursed. Did Noah suffer from PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) or was he just a little too tuned in to "the yetzer ha-ra" - the evil inclination? We do not know, because while text tells us Noah was a righteous man in HIS generation it does not tell us how his generation compared with the generation of, say Abraham. So, we do not know if he was among the best of the best, the best of the worst, or if his experience changed him radically.

Contemporary commentary tells us that fables and legends of neighboring peoples were modified for context and fit into the cultural canon. We can imagine these stories being told around campfires l'dor v'dor: Many versions of many stories were repeated for many generations before they came into the hands of the "great redactor". And even after that, oral tradition kept other parts of the stories alive while new ones were added. Rabbi Arthur Green points out the Chassidic Masters teaching that the Biblical text must be told as it was, as it will be and as it is now to be meaningful.

I started my talk this morning with a grammar lesson about the spelling of Noah's name - Nun-Het- coming from the root of the word "rest". If our fabled simpleton, mentioned above, were to spell the name backwards, that is, - chet-nun, the oral tradition reminds us the word Chein means charm, beauty, favor. Genesis 6:8 tells us that Noah found favor with the Lord.

Shabbat Shalom